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THE VOICE OF COLCHESTER SINCE 1831

WILL THEY OR WON'T THEY?

Travellers' site thrown into doubt

by DAVID GROCOTT

PLANS for Colchester's controversial travellers' site have been thrown into doubt – and it may never be built anywhere in the borough.

Council leader John Jowers exclusively told the County Standard yesterday that, despite his Cabinet agreeing a preferred site in the borough, conditions placed on the development would make it difficult for such a facility to gain planning permission and the project may never go ahead.

"I think there are doubts about it," he said. "It could be the county [council] has a better site elsewhere, outside the borough."

His comments come as sources within the council told the County Standard that they believed a deal had been struck between the new Conservative administration at Colchester Borough Council and their fellow Tories who hold sway at County Hall.

"They are going to make the whole issue just go away," one Lib Dem councillor said.

But Councillor Jowers (Con, West Mersea) emphatically denied any secret deal had been

made: "Nothing has been done behind closed doors. I have never seen so much consultation in my life."

The search for a new 12-pitch travellers' site for Colchester, to free up the existing facility at the Hythe for redevelopment, has so far taken three years.

As the travellers' sites are maintained by Essex County Council, it asked the borough council to suggest the best location for a new travellers' site.

During the search, several abortive attempts to come up with a suggestion were made before consultants were appointed to objectively find the best location.

They assessed a short-list of available sites and last month said the best location would be north of the A12 on Severalls Lane, near to the Severalls Business Park.

Despite opposition from businesses and residents of neighbouring Langham, this suggestion was ratified by the council Cabinet, of which Cllr Jowers is the chairman, at a special meeting on Wednesday.

Now it is up to the county council to decide if it is worth its while applying for planning

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WE DON'T WANT THEM HERE! - Langham residents march along the High Street in protest. Picture: ROBERT SAMBROOK

(38133-5)

Angry villagers march against site proposal

by ROBERT MEAD

MORE than 100 "outraged" people from Langham took to the streets to protest against the proposed travellers' site on their doorstep.

At Wednesday's Colchester Council cabinet meeting, a site in Langham, just north of the A12, was chosen for the new site, despite opposition from villagers who showed their objections by taking to the streets beforehand to try to avert the decision.

The protesters were bussed in especially, marching from Cowdray Crescent, outside the Castle, at 5.15pm and then down the High Street to the Town Hall.

Andy Hardy jointly organised the meeting. Mr Hardy, of Lodge

Lane, Langham, said: "All the villagers are absolutely outraged that this site is going to be foisted on us with little or no attention to the points we've made."

"We get precious little out here for our council tax, you know. We don't even have a street light in Langham, not that we necessarily want one, but we get very little in terms of service."

He also complained about the level of public consultation and how badly promoted the events had been.

He said the protest was peaceful and not meant to be disruptive.

"Cars were booting, people were supportive and there was very little heckling."

"We felt we needed to bring public attention to how we in the village feel. We needed to make our point to make sure that everybody knows we are against it."

Stormy meeting after Langham is earmarked

CONTROVERSIAL plans to build a travellers' site on land near Severalls Lane split the council's Cabinet this week.

But a recommendation that land to the east of the lane be offered to Essex County Council was passed.

At a meeting in the Moot Hall which attracted some 300 people, chairman John Jowers (Con, West Mersea) said: "This is the culmination of a long, emotional and tortuous process."

The 18-month investigation and consultation was one of the most extensive the council had ever undertaken.

Representations from local people, parish councils, borough councillors and businesses were heard.

And fears were voiced about the possible effect on house prices, policing and school places.

Paul Baker, boss of Rapid Electronics, said if the site was used by travellers a development of his company creating 300 jobs would not go ahead.

Whether the council had a legal obligation to provide a travellers' site was questioned.

Rob Johnston, of Myland Parish Council, said: "We consulted and 705 people objected. Perhaps the cabinet will have the courage to listen to those people."

Representatives of parish councils in Langham, Boxted, Great Horkesley and Ardleigh, all opposed the plans.

Christine Atkins was praised for her courage in supporting the scheme, despite being barracked. She said: "The gypsy fraternity is desperate to get its little ones educated - the children deserve a chance."

Colin Sykes (Lib Dem, Stanway) said it was an extremely difficult decision, but urged the cabinet to make it, leaving Essex County Council to 'battle it out'. Chris Arnold (Con, Fordham and Stour) said: "No matter where you put it, this is going to upset someone." Four councillors backed the recommendation, two voted against it and two abstained, meaning it was approved.

New twist in saga

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permission for a travellers' site there.

Cllr Jowers said he felt the conditions placed on the "least worst" plot of land would make it difficult for it to get planning permission.

"They are going to have to go back and say 'oh crumbs'," he said.

"It is far from certain, the conditions which we have put on are going to make it difficult. There are serious issues in planning terms."

"Until I have heard the response of the county I suspect they will send it to their Policy Development Unit. That group will have to decide then on the balance [whether to go ahead with the application]."

"I think it is going to struggle at planning but I can't influence that. These are conditions that I feel are reasonable, but we will have to see what happens."

"I think perhaps the county don't see it first hand, the despair of people living in the area. It was such a cock up at the Hythe and that is what people think of."

Cllr Jowers told Wednesday's meeting: "It may well be Essex County Council will find the conditions too onerous."

The conditions placed on the site, which was until last year an area of strategic open space, are:

- The land be made available to Essex County Council on a fixed term lease
- Oblige Essex County Council to let pitches only in

accordance with its agreed management policy, enforce the terms and provide an on-site management presence

- Essex County Council ensure the site is kept clean and tidy to Colchester Borough Council's reasonable satisfaction
- Essex County Council meet all running costs

- The site be reinstated to agricultural use and returned to the Borough Council in the event it is no longer needed or if the terms of the lease are breached.

Last year the County Standard reported that the man then in charge of the travellers' site hunt, Lib Dem Terry Sutton, believed the cost of the search had passed £130,000.

Yesterday Cllr Jowers said this figure was exaggerated and the real figure was £77,000.

The Essex County Councillor with responsibility for travellers, Kay Twitchen, was unavailable for comment yesterday.